

Veterans Committee Holds Congressional Hearing in Bangor

Monday, August 22 2005

WASHINGTON, DC

— At the request of Congressman Michael Michaud, the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health held a field hearing today at Eastern Maine Community

College in Bangor,

to focus on rural veterans' access to primary care. The hearing was held in Bangor after Congressman Michaud—the Subcommittee's Ranking Member—and Subcommittee Chairman Henry Brown of South Carolina decided to hold field hearings in each of their districts.

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"Today's hearing gives us an important opportunity to hear directly from the veterans and the health care providers in Maine," said Michaud. "It is important to hear both the successes and the challenges that VA and its patients experience. It is one of my top priorities to ensure that all veterans, and especially veterans in rural areas like Maine, have top quality care. Our witnesses have certainly given us some important insights on rural health care delivery to take back to Washington."

The largest of the four House Veterans' Affairs Committee subcommittees, the subcommittee on health has jurisdiction over matters affecting veterans' hospitals, medical care, and the treatment of veterans.

"At our hearing today we will look at how VA is providing veterans in rural Maine with access to primary care," said Chairman Henry Brown Jr., "what challenges VA confronts in providing rural veterans with access to primary care; and what unique and innovative measures can be taken by VA in an effort to meet these challenges."

Testifying before the committee today were Dr. Jeannette Chirico-Post, Network Director VISN 1; John Sims, Jr., Center Director, Togus VA Medical Center; Roger Lessard, President, Local 2610, American Federation of

Government Employees; Gary Laweryson, Chairman of the Maine Veterans Coordinating Committee; and Donald Simoneau, First Vice Commander, The American Legion Department of Maine.

"As our healthcare delivery system continues to evolve, it is critical that we continue to monitor our services through internal and external audits to ensure the quality of our services," said Togus VA Medical Center Director, John Sims, Jr. "We will continue to coordinate closely with Maine's veterans and with national and state Veterans Service Organizations, as we do our very best to address our veterans' concerns."

Veterans from rural and small communities represent more than one in five Veterans Health Administration (VHA) users nationwide. Roughly one in six Mainers is a veteran. The challenge for mostly rural states like Maine is to enhance the capacity to serve veterans in even the most remote areas. The need to improve access to care grows even more urgent as troops from Operation Iraqi and Enduring Freedom return home to small towns and rural areas.

"Rural health care markets face significant challenges as compared to urban markets, including a limited number of specialists, less access to expensive technologies and a less affluent patient population," said AFGE President Roger Lessard. "At the same time, rural Americans are disproportionately represented in the military. Thus, it is no surprise that a disparity in health care exists between veterans living in rural areas and their urban counterparts."

Representatives of Maine's Veterans Service Organizations touched on the need to ensure appropriate funding to ensure that the VA can keep up with increased enrollment.

"The American Legion has advocated for assured funding to ensure shortfalls such as that experienced by VA this year does not happen in the future," said the American Legion's Donald Simoneau. Gary Laweryson, Chairman of the Maine Veterans Coordinating Committee said, "Many of Maine's rural veterans are on a limited, fixed income and are unable to afford transport to Togus or the nearest CBOC (Community Based Outpatient Clinic). Nor can these veterans afford health insurance or access to local care."

"Maine veterans routinely travel more than two hours each way to obtain anything beyond the most basic levels of care," said Michaud. "Our primary goal with this hearing is to make sure the men and women who sacrificed so much for this great country have access to the health care they deserve and I look forward to working with Chairman Brown to make this a reality."

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